EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC (2004–2019): BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

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Abstract

The year 2024 will celebrate the 20th anniversary of Slovakia's European membership. However, the country has continually displayed the lowest interest in European politics – the turnout in the European elections is only roughly 18%. Moreover, the Slovaks' confidence level in the European Parliament ranges from 50% to 70%. The "Second-Order Elections" theory only partially accounts for the causes of the low turnout in "European elections". The electoral differentiation between the western (capital) Bratislava region (preferences for liberals and social democrats) and the eastern Slovak Prešov region (Christian democrats and populist conservatives) showed differences in the European orientation of the Slovak voter. The results of four elections to the European Parliament (2004–2019) confirmed the electoral cleavage between the western and eastern regions. Since the powerful Slovak parties frequently vary in their level of Euro-optimism/Euro-pessimism to obtain more significant electoral benefits (ĽS-HZDS, SMER-SD, OĽaNO). To comprehend the nuances of Slovak voters' electoral behaviour, it is reasonable to determine the public aspects of Euro-optimism/Euro-pessimism in Slovak regions at different geographical extremities. The students' political socialization in the Bratislava and Prešov regions demonstrated the delegitimization of parties as political institutions and the highest level of mistrust in Slovak politicians. In this light, Slovak voters began to search for "new faces" in politics. The Prešov region displays unconditional trust for regional politicians (parties) (63%). According to the survey findings, we observe the disparity in confidence in social institutions: public organizations in Bratislava versus the church in Prešov. We believe that the level of conservatism, rather than specific party ideologies, is the primary factor influencing individuals' perceptions of European politics.

Keywords: *European elections; Euroscepticism; electoral cleavage; Bratislava region; Prešov region.*

Introduction

The Slovak Republic has gone a long way to successful European integration. In the 1990s, the country struggled with Vladimir Meciar's post-socialism and had to defend its European identity. Since the 2000s within the EU environment, the country has witnessed growing political confrontations as the "new wave" politicians were eager to seize power (e.g. the long-term premiership of Robert Fico). Unfortunately, European politics failed to get the Slovak voter interested, and the European elections received the "supplementary" status. A low level of interest in European politics in addition to strong post-socialist traditions forms stereotypes of high Euroscepticism in Slovakia.

Another factor that conventionally divides Slovak regions into "Eurooptimistic" and "Eurosceptic" is the electoral cleavage. Eventually, voting in the west and east or the north and south frequently yields different results. Some regions are more inclined to support conservative politicians, and others, on the contrary, vote for liberals. This trend refers to supporting European integration or the revision of relations between the Slovak Republic and the European Union.

A Central European country, the Slovak Republic faces the threat of deteriorating democratic institutions' quality. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian-Ukrainian war, the late 2022 deep political crisis, and Robert Fico's likely "political revenge" in the early parliamentary elections have put the resilience of the Slovak Government's democratic institutions to the test. If we briefly analyze the electoral cycles in Slovakia, we will observe a distinct regional divide. In the western part of the country, voters predominantly support pro-European politicians, including liberal and liberal-conservative parties or candidates. In contrast, the eastern region has shown a strong preference for critics of Western and European policies, with a significant majority of voters backing conservative and populist candidates. In 2024, Slovakia will hold both presidential and European elections. Therefore, the country will need to diminish the existing electoral cleavages in the regions, apparent in the European elections, and preserve the general European course of the country.

The present study addresses the problem of the European elections in current Slovak politics based on the Slovak electoral preferences regarding the European Parliament (2004–2019). The article aims to confirm the electoral cleavages between two politically opposite regions, such as the Bratislava region and the Prešov region. The authors analyze the national and subregional levels of the EU election results, Euroscepticism-induced political and ideological cleavages between parties, and findings of a sociological survey to identify students' political orientations at the universities of Bratislava and Prešov. Hence, the study endeavours to answer the following research questions: (a) why do Slovak voters display low interest in the EU elections; (b) how relevant are the electoral cleavages between "liberal" Bratislava and "conservative" Prešov in the context of European elections; (c) how students'

political priorities in the two regions correlate with the electoral stereotypes about the most liberal Bratislava and the most conservative Prešov. The structure of the paper complies with the defined objective and research questions.

Material and Methods

The primary approach is to uncover the peculiarities of the so-called European elections (elections to the European Parliament) in the Slovak Republic. We determine the electoral differentiation level between the conventional West-East division of Slovakia through a comparative analysis of all European election results in the Bratislava region and the Eastern Slovak Prešov region.

The first research vector aims to explain the lowest average turnout in the European elections. The second identifies electoral cleavages between the conventionally "pro-European" Bratislava region and the "conservative" Prešov region in the East. The third seeks to determine the ideological preferences of students in the Bratislava and Prešov regions of the Slovak Republic. In the course of the comparative analysis, we have employed the "Second-Order Elections" theory and the party division into "soft" and "hard" Eurosceptics. Data of the European elections in Slovakia (such as voter turnout, the level of party electoral support and some Eurobarometer data (Eurobarometer, 2024) that correlate with specific elections) served as the study material. We will be discussing four election campaigns from 2004 to 2019. To explain electoral cleavages between regions, we utilised data on the selected elections in the Bratislava and Prešov regions. The second empirical block of the study is survey findings of the own survey conducted in September – October 2018 in all eight self-governing regions (Slovak – Samosprávné kraje) of the Slovak Republic. We received a total of 271 filled-in questionnaires, but for our comparative analysis of the Bratislava and Prešov regions, we used 51 questionnaires. I will clarify the sociological sample, as our goal is to explain the electoral divide between Bratislava and the Prešov region. (1) We specifically compare electoral cleavages in these two regions. To do this, we collected 51 questionnaires, with 32 from Bratislava and 19 from Prešov. The remaining 220 questionnaires were gathered from six other Slovak regions. (2) The small number of responses is due to our intention to conduct an expert survey; we targeted political science students who specialize in European politics. Since some universities do not offer political science as a major, we also included students from related fields, such as international relations. Respondents were asked to identify their ideological preferences by selecting from five fundamental ideologies: right radicals, Christian democrats, liberals, social democrats, and left radicals. They also assessed their level of trust in various institutions, ranging from traditional politicians to the church. Additionally, they were asked whether they supported the idea of having "new faces" in Slovak politics.

The European Context of Slovak Politics: A Short Theoretical Review

In the year 2004, when the Slovak Republic joined the European Union. However, during the first decade, the so-called "Slovak paradox" arose, i.e. the Slovaks trusted European structures, but were reluctant to get involved in European elections (Gyárfášová, 2014, p. 71). This paradox stemmed from voters perceiving the European Union as a "full fridge" (Gyárfášová, 2014, p. 88) rather than a platform for discussions about European values. Post-socialist transitional societies often saw European integration and direct accession to the EU as a means to enhance their well-being. Instead of rapidly improving the population's financial status, overcoming or reducing the economic disparity between the old and new EU members (after 2004) could have been the prerequisite for consolidating European identities in the Slovak political narrative. On the one hand, most post-socialist countries, such as Slovakia, commonly display weak interest in the elections to the European Parliament. On the other hand, turnout in Slovakia is at the lowest average, so it looks more problematic. On the eve of the 2019 European elections, the main reasons for the lowest turnout were (a) the chaotic strategy of Slovak political parties in the issues of European politics, (b) most voters' limited understanding of the EU membership (solely for economic benefits, e.g., passive attitude towards the European Union) (Gyárfášová & Henderson, 2018). One could mention the "Second-Order Elections" theory, successfully adjusted to Central Europe's electoral environment, but this, however, only partially works in conditions of post-socialism (Kovář, 2016). Generally, the Slovak Republic frequently deviated from the traditional norms of European politics, e.g. the leading Slovak parties have changed their ideological stance to attract as many voters as possible. The example of the Slovak social democratic movement best illustrates this electoral strategy. A firmly left-centre party since 2006, SMER-SD has significantly revised its ideology since 2018. The party shifted towarleaned to a more populist and Slovak identity, rather than adhering to European social democracy (Marušiak, 2021). Moreover, the party's Euro-optimistic or Euro-sceptic stances are closely intertwined with their social democracy.

Eventually, Slovak social democracy in the early 2000s stemmed from Europeanization, while de-Europeanization led to the social populism of the 2018–2020s (Marušiak, 2021). Accordingly, one can only conventionally differentiate Slovak Eurosceptic parties into "soft" and "hard" due to the variability of explicit ideological frameworks. The basic ideological positions of Euroscepticism have been related to the revision of the country's EU membership ("soft Euroscepticism") or the criticism and likely withdrawal (or a radical change of the membership terms) from the European Union ("hard Euroscepticism") (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2000; Haydanka, 2020).

Since the early post-socialist period, the Slovak model of Euroscepticism had been quite peculiar. Long-time Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar created a

conservative populist model of post-socialist Slovakia ("Mečiarism"[1]), which barely correlated with the Euro-Atlantic course of most former communist autocracies. The European Commission's 1997 decision that the Slovak Republic did not comply with the Copenhagen criteria to join the EU only reinforced it. (Agenda 2000, 1997). Slovakia became the only V4 cohort country that did not receive a positive assessment. As a result, in the subsequent years, Slovakia oscillated between Euroscepticism and Europhobia in an attempt to join the European path of development (Henderson, 2001). After the political elites' rotation in the 1998 parliamentary elections and the formation of Mikuláš Dzurinda's pro-European Government, Slovak Eurointegration vectors started changing. Europeanization in the Slovak Republic resulted in the country's "catch-up" accession to the European Union. During the EU accession preparation stage, Europeanization was top-down, whereas after joining the EU, its direction was bottom-up (Leška, 2015, p. 168). This might be regarded as the prerequisite for exacerbating Euroscepticism in the country since a significant part of Slovak society failed to change its sceptical attitude towards the European Union over time.

On the eve of the most recent European elections in 2019, another factor deepened the Eurosceptic sentiment, i.e. the radicalization of society and, accordingly, the voter. "Slow radicalization" resulted in a hostile society's reaction to some aspects of European politics (Ušiak & Jankovská, 2021). Thus, Slovak extremist and populist parties particularly exploited the theme of migration (Cirner & Dudinská, 2020). Similarly, on the eve of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, migration policy issues were among the essential narratives. Despite tackling the most controversial topics within the European Union (migration, economic disparities, anti-globalism, etc.), the Slovak version of Euroscepticism is peculiar. The turning point in the growth of Eurosceptic sentiments in Slovak politics was 2011 when the main parties (in particular, SaS) were reluctant to support the European Financial Stability Facility (Gyárfášová & Mokrá, 2020, p. 131). The recent external challenges have only amplified the political debate regarding the European prospects of the Slovak Republic, primarily the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) and the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022 – present). The pandemic and the large-scale war in the east of Europe contributed (entirely or partially) to the resignation of Igor Matovič's Government in March 2021 and the disintegration of the pro-European coalition in Slovakia at the end of 2022. Another level of perceiving European politics is subregional. According to the results of all European elections (2004–2019), we can outline four main regional groups of the Slovak electorate in favour of pro-European political forces: (a) the country's largest cities – Bratislava and Košice, (b) regions with Hungarian ethnic minorities, (c) the south-west of the country with well-developed agriculture, and (d) the

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[1] A unique model of Slovak semi-authoritarian administration based on the conservative and populist politics of Vladimír Mečiar, whose government in the mid-1990s can be considered the heyday of Mečiarism. The phenomenon is widely studied in comparative political science (Haughton, 2003; Baer, 2001).

north-east of the country, where the population is highly religious. On the other hand, the Northwest, with historically strong traditions of nationalism and etatism, is inherently Eurosceptic (Plešivčák, 2020, p. 193). However, the electoral differentiation between regions is the most obvious during the parliamentary elections which are the most popular with the voters (Plešivčák, 2011). One way or another, the sub-regional level more objectively displays the pro-Europeanness level in different parts of the country than the nationwide indicators of the number of voters supporting Eurosceptic parties.

The Peculiarity of the Lowest Turnout in the Elections to the European Parliament

At the beginning of May 2004, a month and a half after the Slovak Republic joined the European Union, voters were to participate in the election, to the European Parliament. Accordingly, the Slovak voter got involved in the pan-European electoral processes, an essential element of the country's "Europeanization". However, subsequent electoral cycles proved that Slovaks never condoned the European elections. The low turnout in the European elections could indicate the Slovak electorate's increased Euroscepticism, but such an allegation would be too superficial. Therefore, we will consider the current issues of the European elections in the Slovak Republic from different perspectives.

Firstly, we contemplate various aspects of voter turnout in the European elections compared to other types of elections (national, regional) and in the European context. The answer will be obvious: Slovak voters are barely interested in European elections, thus displaying low electoral activity. The average turnout in European elections is 18,09%, the lowest compared to other types of elections in the country. Slovaks are mostly interested in national politics, so they prefer parliamentary and presidential elections: in the former, the average turnout is 70,77% and in the latter – 52,04% (Haydanka, 2021, p. 14). Slovak citizens are also active in the local and regional levels of politics. Local electoral processes drastically changed in 2022 when regional and local elections combined into a single electoral cycle, increasing voter turnout to 46,19% (Voľby, 2022). Compared to European politics, the Slovak voter is much more involved in problems of national and local (regional) politics. Considering the Slovak turnout in the European elections on the EU electoral map, the situation will be even more unambiguous. At four elections to the European Parliament in the Slovak Republic (2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019), the country displayed the worst turnout among all EU member states. Slovakia joined the European Union along with other post-socialist (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia) and post-Soviet Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), so we also compare the turnout at the European elections in Slovakia with the average turnout in these countries. As we can observe, the European election turnout has specific decreasing patterns, i.e. 40–50% at the European level, about 30% in the EU-8 countries, and the lowest in the Slovak Republic, including a hardly legitimate indicator of 13% in 2014.

The second aspect of the Slovak European elections peculiarities is an attempt to explain the low involvement of Slovak voters in European politics. First of all, worth mentioning is the "Second-Order Elections" theory, proposed by Karlheinz Reif and Herman Schmitt concerning the elections to the European Parliament (Reif & Schmitt, 1997). The theory was tailored to the former post-socialist countries, which, following their EU accession, became involved in European electoral cycles. The European elections are of secondary importance due to several factors: (a) the turnout is lower compared to national elections that form the Parliament and the Government, (b) "opposition voting", when anti-government and extra-parliamentary parties are elected, (c) weak media's involvement in the European election campaign and the very elections, (d) the central parties' lists include candidates who were unsuccessful in the parliamentary elections (Kovář, 2016, p. 223). In agreement with the Second-Order Elections theory, voting in the European elections in Slovakia can be defined as a partial protest. On the one hand, both mainstream (such as SMER-SD) and weakly influential (Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia) political forces can gain support, as well as extra-parliamentary parties (Progressive Slovakia)[2]. The results of the 2019 elections display this situation.

Another aspect of the European election's perception is the Slovak attitude towards them. Parties often nominate lesser-known candidates or consider the European parliamentary seat a kind of political retirement for meritorious party members (Slováci, 2004). Of course, such an approach will hardly increase Slovaks' involvement in the European elections. In addition, Slovakia's electoral quota in the Europarliament is 14 MEPs out of 705 total (only 1,98% of the total). Mentally, the Slovak voter would regard the European elections as insignificant, since only a few MEPs represent the Slovak Republic in the European Parliament. Conversely, the argument about the "small voice" of Slovak deputies in the European Parliament is controversial because other EU countries have even smaller representation, yet their voter turnout is higher (Gyárfášová & Henderson, 2016). After all, a Slovak voter paradox is associated with a high level of trust in the European Parliament versus low voter turnout. Slovak citizens acknowledge a high level of the European Parliament's legitimacy amidst the lowest voter turnout in Europe.

The Slovaks' confidence in the European Parliament has slightly faltered in two recent election campaigns, and every second Slovak still trusts this principal representative body of Europe. So far, the European Parliament's legitimacy is twice as high as the legitimacy of the European election.

The third peculiarity of the Slovak EU election turnout is regional differentiation. If the European election turnout is low throughout the country, how is it reflected in the regions? Let us compare the Bratislava and Prešov regions. In four European elections (2004–2019), the Bratislava region is ahead of Prešov. The average turnout in the former is 22,52%, and 16,9% in the latter (Elections and Referenda, 2023), and these figures confirm that the elections to the European Parliament in Slovakia are the least electorally popular, this

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[2] We will thoroughly consider this electoral differentiation in the next part.

phenomenon being nationwide rather than regional. After all, the turnout difference between the two regions is insignificant. The most noticeable electoral differentiation between Bratislava and Prešov was in the first elections in 2004 (20,45% vs 15,57%) and in the 2019 elections (31,35% vs 20,88%). We claim it is insignificant, although Bratislava has repeatedly displayed more considerable interest in European politics than the East Slovak region.

Slovak Electoral Preferences in the European Elections: between Bratislava and Prešov

The results of the European elections either confirm or refute the electoral cleavages between west and east Slovakia. In the example of the Bratislava and Prešov regions, we identify the differentiation in voting for particular political parties. We based our political parties' classification on two criteria: (a) the party ideology on the "liberals – radicals" scale, and (b) the party "Eurosceptics – Eurooptimists" positioning. Four European elections were held in the Slovak Republic from 2004–2019.

The Slovak Republic held the first European elections about a month after joining the EU. On June 13, 2004, Slovaks elected their 14 MEPs for the first time. We must mention the political context of the elections that were to complete the country's European integration, thereby legitimizing the European Parliament in Slovakia. Unlike its Visegrad Four counterparts, Slovak Eurointegration was more ambiguous due to mečiarism[3] in the late 1990s and the ultimate political struggle in 1998–99 between HZDS and SDKU. Despite the political context, the first European elections already established a tradition of low turnout.

The election results confirmed that electoral differentiation in Slovakia was high. At the national level, five political forces divided the seats proportionately: the pro-government SDKU party (conservatives/Eurooptimists), the newly formed SMER (Social Democrats/Eurooptimists), Mečiar's ĽS–HZDS (conservatives/soft Eurosceptics), the KDH (Christian democrats/Eurooptimists) got three European seats each, and ethnic Hungarians of SMK (liberal conservatives/Eurooptimists) received two seats (Elections and Referenda, 2023). At the regional level, the situation looks different. The pro-government SDKÚ was the obvious favourite in the Bratislava region, getting one in every four votes (23,54%). Further on, SMER, ĽS-HZDS and KDH received 15% each. Hungarians traditionally hold firm positions in the west of Slovakia, as 8,48% of voters supported SMK[4]. Unlike the capital region, neither pro-

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[3] In our previous studies, we have discussed various political aspects of mečiarism in more detail (Haydanka, 2021).

[4] We should mention the result of the newly formed SF (Robíme to pre deti), which managed to get 5,55% (Elections and Referenda, 2023). It is a pro-European party that emerged from the SDKÚ party milieu. However, in the future, the party failed to gain a foothold in Slovak politics.

European SDKÚ nor pro-Mečiar ĽS-HZDS, and not even the "third force" SMER were the leader in the Prešov region, where the KDH celebrated victory with 23,34%. Such a result shows that the local electorate was highly conservative, and this attitude influenced the European elections as well. The political trio of SDKÚ (19,26%), SMER (16,09%) and ĽS-HZDS (14,41%) managed to attract voters.

Also, two more results are worth discussing from the standpoint of electoral deviation. First of all, the 8,85% received by the communist KSS. It is a traditional communist party that displays hard Euroscepticism and appeals to the Slovak communist past that most of the Prešov region has continued to profess even a month after the country's EU accession. Another surprising result is ANO, established by one of the leaders of the Markiza media holding. Unlike the communists, it is of liberal European orientation getting 4,62% (Elections and Referenda, 2023). Comparing the results, we can claim that the first European elections demonstrated pronounced, albeit partial, electoral differentiation between the Bratislava and Prešov regions. The former voted for traditional Europe-oriented national parties, while the latter supported conservative Christian Democrats and hard Eurosceptics of the KSS. Therefore, the electorate in both regions retains pro-European sentiments, but support for conservative ideology prevails noticeably in the East Slovak region.

The subsequent elections to the European Parliament were on June 6, 2009. These and the next European elections in Slovakia took place under the SMER-SD's political dominance over its political competitors. After the harsh political confrontation between Vladimír Mečiar's ĽS-HZDS and the pro-European SDKÚ in the late 1990s and early 2000s, SMER was gaining momentum. The party became an alternative to the two, offering a conventional "third way" for Slovakia, the one between post-socialism (ĽS-HZDS) and Europhilia (SDKÚ). SMER won parliamentary elections in the decade 2006–2016, with its leader Robert Fico heading three Governments.

Unlike the 2004 European elections, 2009 confirmed SMER's superiority in the elections to the European Parliament. Robert Fico's party won five European seats, and five parties (SDKÚ-DS, SMK and KDH) divided the remaining eight seats, winning two seats each. ĽS-HZDS and SNS (nationalists/Eurosceptics) won one seat each (Elections and Referenda, 2023). The Bratislava region recorded a dual power because SMER won with a result of 26,94%, and SDKÚ-DS (25,48%) was running up, lagging by slightly over one per cent. Instead, the ĽS-HZDS (6,77%) ultimately lost leadership. The Christian Democrats demonstrated the conservative voter's stability in the capital region (8,61%). The ethnic Hungarians of SMK got slightly more than five per cent (5,73%). The newly formed liberal-conservative and openly Soft-Eurosceptic SaS became instantly popular with the voters. Unexpectedly, nationalists of SNS got quite a high result for moderate urban voters and were very close to passing the voting barrier (4,75%). In the Prešov region, SMER was the unequivocal winner, getting every third vote (34,42%). Two political forces ran up with almost equal electoral support, i.e. KDH (17,82%) and SDKÚ-DS (16,63%). Against the general electoral background, Mečiar's

populist ĽS-HZDS managed to get 9,66%. SNS's 5,39% also proved significant conservatism of the East Slovak voter. The far-right SNS party, which advocates hard Euroscepticism, secured 5,39% of the vote.The results of the 2009 European elections displayed steady electoral differentiation between the Bratislava and Prešov regions. Eventually, the former supported mostly liberal-moderate forces, while the East Slovak region leaned toward conservatives (in 2009, even nationalists).

Subsequent elections to the European Parliament were held on May 24, 2014. On the Slovak political map, SMER-SD dominated, which resulted in the second Government of Robert Fico (2012–2016). In the post-Mečiar decade, new political forces emerged, which would play a significant role in Slovak politics in the following years. Firstly, Igor Matovič's populist party OĽaNO stood by liberal-conservative values but essentially was an all-encompassing party and met the requirements of Euro-optimists. Secondly, the NOVA party would join electoral coalitions with conservative forces and identify as Eurosceptic. According to the election results, traditional parties won the most of European seats. In total, as many as eight political forces won seats in the European Parliament, which set an electoral record for Slovakia and demonstrated considerable diversity in Slovak politics. It was SMER-SD that stood out, winning four seats out of 13. KDH and SDKÚ-DS received two European seats each, and five political forces delegated to the European Parliament one MEP each, such as NOVA (in a coalition with two conservative parties), ethnic Hungarians Most–Híd (liberal-conservatives and Euro-optimists), SMK, SaS, and OĽaNO (Elections and Referenda, 2023). Bratislava region typically shows a high level of political fragmentation. SMER-SD displayed the best result getting 20,07% of votes. Five political forces almost equally distributed the ballots: SDKÚ-DS (13,12%), the conservative coalition led by NOVA (11,81%), SaS (11,2%), KDH (10,4%) and OĽaNO (8,88%). The capital region maintains its political reputation of liberal or moderate-conservative orientation, as liberal conservatives committed to Slovakia's European future dominated. The results differed in the Prešov region. SMER-SD also won there with nearly 30% (28,28%), and Christian Democrats KDH was traditionally strong (20,4%). The rest of the parties failed because only the new political forces OĽaNO (7,16%) and the conservative coalition of Eurosceptics from NOVA (5,48%) passed the voting barrier. SDKÚ-DS never got even the minimum 5% (4,88%) (Elections and Referenda, 2023). In the Prešov region, voters continually supported national leaders or Christian Democrats. During the 2014 European elections, the crisis of electoral support for pro-European parties intensified in the East Slovak region. We believe that in the context of the 2014 elections, the electoral differentiation between Bratislava and Prešov reprised.

The penultimate elections to the European Parliament in Slovakia were on May 25, 2019. At that time, the socio-political context was slightly different compared to the previous two campaigns: Robert Fico completed his dominance at the top of Slovak politics in March 2018 with his resignation as

prime minister (Kováč, Orviská, Praus & Kuzmány, 2018)[5]. This was the third Fico-led Government. However, in a deep political crisis following the murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak, the Government composition was considerably delegitimized. As a result, the country began to search for "new faces", resulting in the election of Zuzanna Čaputova, a non-system politician and public activist, as President in March 2019. Such political trends also affected most political parties, i.e. old party leaders lost people's confidence, whereas newer parties, on the contrary, attracted more electoral support. The 2019 European elections took place under the Slovak political system "rebranding". Parliamentary elections in Slovakia were due in February 2020 and were supposed to reboot the political system. The results of the European elections proved that Slovak voters changed their political preferences. Close to the newly elected President Z. Čaputova, coalition Progressive Slovakia – TOGETHER[6] won. Progressive Slovakia, a liberal and openly Europhile political force, managed to get four seats out of 14. Despite the legitimacy crisis, SMER-SD managed to get three European mandates; three parties, i.e., SaS, KDH and People's Party Our Slovakia[7], got two seats each; the future winners of the parliamentary elections OĽaNO took one seat (Elections and Referenda, 2023). Let us consider more thoroughly the political project of the notorious Marian Kotleba. His People's Party is a traditional far-right force that advocates hard Euroscepticism with frequent xenophobic and anti-Roma allegations, anti-integration and anti-migration verbiage.

In the Bratislava region, the liberal coalition Progressive Slovakia – TOGETHER (36,28%) dominates. On the one hand, this testifies to the liberal preferences of Bratislava voters and their affection for the "new political faces". On the other hand, it also demonstrates significant distrust towards traditional political actors. SMER-SD got little support (10,07%), whereas SaS (14,72%) got the best result. Christian democrats KDH (8,43%) and right-wing radicals People's Party Our Slovakia (8,21%) received eight per cent each. The results in the Prešov region slightly differed because local voters would repeatedly support mainly conservative forces. SMER-SD remained the first (17,68%), and the Christian Democrats KDH (16,20%) were slightly behind. Prešov voters almost equally supported the most liberal (Progressive Slovakia – TOGETHER – 13,11%) and the right-wing radical political forces (People's Party Our Slovakia – 11,61%). SaS (6,26%) and OĽaNO (6,72%) got nearly equal support. In addition, we must mention that the Christian Union (5,28%), Christian Democrats with a Euro-Atlantic political programme, passed the voting barrier (Elections and Referenda, 2023). The European elections of 2019 once again confirmed the electoral differentiation as liberal or liberal-conservative political forces got support in the capital region, while conservative parties continuously dominated in the Eastern Slovak region, and

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[5] Author's translation.
[6] Slov. – *Koalícia PS a SPOLU* (author's translation).
[7] Slov. – *Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko* (author's translation).

the influence of Christian Democrats increased. Further, we will look into conservatism in both the Bratislava and Prešov regions.

2024 European Parliament elections: Have Slovaks shifted their electoral preferences ahead of the elections?

The recent European Parliament elections took place in early June 2024 and may have shifted the dynamics of European politics within Slovak society. The increased engagement in European electoral processes is evident in Slovakia, as the country will no longer be considered an outright outsider in terms of voter turnout. A record 34,38% of eligible voters participated in the elections, allowing Slovakia to finally escape from the bottom of the voter turnout rankings, surpassing Croatia, Bulgaria, and Lithuania (Turnout by year, 2024). Several factors contributed to the improvement in Slovak voter turnout for these European elections.

Voter turnout increased overall in all EU member states in 2024, reaching an average of 50,74%. This was the highest figure since the 1994 general elections and marked a significant rise since the accession of several post-socialist countries to the EU. Slovakia contributed to this trend of electoral growth and did not stand out as an outsider compared to most EU countries.

Additionally, there are demographic factors contributing to the increased turnout. In the previous elections of 2019, voter turnout was also high, recorded at 50,66%. One key reason for the improvement in turnout is the engagement of pro-European youth who have turned 18 in countries that recently joined the EU. This generation sees European political issues as equally important as domestic matters. After the 2019 elections, this aspect was highlighted by the newly elected President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli (Survey, 2019). Each year, an increasing number of Slovak youth are expected to participate in the elections to the European Parliament. One significant factor influencing voter turnout was Robert Fico's political maneuvers during the early parliamentary elections of 2023. The experienced Slovak politician successfully formed a government coalition, often employing populist tactics (Mikeš, 2023). In contrast, the main competitors of SMER-SD, Progressive Slovakia, received record support of 17,96% (Elections and Referenda. 2023), but had to join the opposition. The European Parliament elections could showcase the support for Progressive Slovakia within European politics and reflect the general trust of Slovak voters in a pro-European political force, especially after eight months of parliamentary elections. This might encourage more liberal-oriented parties to mobilize voters and motivate a protest vote.

The results of the 2024 European Parliament elections highlighted the ongoing electoral competition between the two main parties: the pro-European Progressive Slovakia, which garnered 27,81% of the votes, and the incumbent Prime Minister Robert Fico's party, SMER-SD, which received 24,76%. SMER-SD has faced repeated accusations of harboring pro-Russian sentiments. Additionally, right-wing radical Eurosceptics have traditionally performed well in European elections. In 2024, the right-wing radical party, REPUBLIKA,

secured third place with 12,53% of the votes, earning them two parliamentary seats. The closest political allies of Fico's party, HLAS-SD, received 7,18% of the vote, while the Christian Democrats (KDH) obtained 7,14%, with each of these parties earning one parliamentary seat (European election results, 2024). The results of the 2024 European elections in Slovakia highlighted an apparent cleavage between pro-European and Eurosceptic voters. This divide significantly impacted the formation of government coalitions and shaped the electoral strategies of the major political parties in Slovakia (Martinkovič, 2021).

The most significant outcome of the 2024 European Parliament elections was the shift in their status from "additional" to "influential" elections. With one in three Slovak voters participating, the legitimacy of the European Parliament elections has notably increased. This growing significance of the European elections within the Slovak political landscape is even more evident given the general "fatigue" among Slovak voters regarding electoral processes and direct voting. Over the months from September 2023 to June 2024, Slovaks elected a new parliament, a president, and European deputies. Despite this election fatigue, one in three Slovak voters found the motivation to support their preferred political parties in the European political arena during the summer of 2024.

Political Socialization and Ideological Preferences of Students: West Slovakia vs East Slovakia

To explore the level of political socialization, legitimacy and, ultimately, the conservatism of the Slovak voter, we conducted a sociological survey. We chose Slovak students as a random sample for our study for two main reasons. Firstly, these are enrolled at the country's leading universities, so their political socialization should correlate with their social and professional status. We interviewed social sciences and humanities majors (with an emphasis on future political scientists, sociologists, international relations experts, etc.) since they are mostly concerned with political issues. Secondly, the social group of students is considered an electoral prospect for most political forces. Students have always been the most protesting, reactionary and politically active social group, confirmed by mass anti-government demonstrations in the capital Bratislava in February–April 2018 related to the murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak. We received 21 questionnaires in the Bratislava region and 30 in the Prešov region.

The first set of questions related to the legitimacy of politicians, the support for certain social institutions and the possibilities of student political participation. We must mention that Slovak politicians' legitimacy is low in both regions. The situation is slightly better in the Bratislava region, with an average trust in politicians being 22%. In the Prešov region, about 18% trust politicians. These low indicators may stem from the general political crisis in the country and the search for "new faces" in politics. It is worth mentioning that we are discussing student youth who seldom support mainstream

politicians. Further, the respondents were offered to rate the most trusted social institutions. We must instantly state that politicians are the least trusted (more precisely, respondents were offered the option "individual politicians"). Moreover, the priorities in the regions differed significantly: the Bratislava region trusts public activists, and Prešov – the church. Almost half of the respondents in region placed these two social institutions as their priorities. In the Bratislava region, the Internet is highly trusted, preceding institutions with a low level of trust, such as traditional mass media, courts and the church. In the Prešov region, courts and public activists also belong to the group with a high level of trust. Instead, only a slight percentage of students trust the mass media (Internet and traditional media).

The two regions are congruent in the opportunities for students to express themselves in political life. Participation in public life is a priority channel for young people to get involved in political life in their region and the country. The "voting in the elections" option comes second in both. The least popular was "the opportunity to influence politics through membership in political parties". Party forms of political participation are delegitimized due to students' reluctance to support traditional parties in Slovakia.

Next, the students were asked to determine their commitment to a specific party ideology and offered to choose on a broad ideological scale, placing political ideologies between two extreme poles, i.e. right and left radicalism. A total of five classical political ideologies are proposed: (a) right-wing radicals (extreme nationalists), (b) Christian Democrats, (c) liberals, (d) social democrats, and (e) left-wing radicals (communists). We converted the respondents' answers into percentages and saw the difference in the ideological preferences of the two regions.

Some respondents could not decide on their commitment to a specific political ideology: only 10% of respondents in the Prešov Region, whereas in the Bratislava Region, every fourth (24%) was undecided. Regarding ideological preferences, in the capital region, the Social Democrats gained the most support (44%), while in the East Slovak region, nearly half of the respondents (47%) voted for the Christian Democrats.

Another favoured political ideology in the Bratislava region is Christian democracy. Against this background, 5% of right-wing radicals or liberals is more of a deviation. In the Prešov region, the picture is more balanced as both liberals and social democrats have some support. Importantly, in the Prešov region, no respondent identified himself/herself with a radical political ideology – right or left. Simultaneously, the East of Slovakia favours conservative Christian ideology, which manifests itself in voting for the KDH or parties close to Christian-democratic ideology.

Ultimately, we attempted to determine the correlation between the students' ideological preferences and their actual voting based on local elections to be held at the end of 2018. Respondents were asked which political force should dominate in their region. Notably, the list of parties included the most influential parties as of the fall of 2018 (primarily parliamentary parties). Therefore, in this list, we will not find, in particular, Progressive Slovakia,

which has been gaining electoral support since the crisis of Robert Fico's Government. In the Bratislava region, the percentage of respondents who are undecided about supporting political parties is high – 24%. They may have been the same respondents who were undecided about their commitment to a specific political ideology. In the capital region, the regional factor prevails, and every third respondent is ready to support a regional political force (31%). Students actively vote for the liberal-conservative SaS (15%) and the Christian Democrats KDH (10%). OĽaNO, SMER-SD, SMK and even the Kotleba radicals – ĽSNS get only 5% in Bratislava. In the Prešov region, the students' mistrust towards traditional political forces is even higher. Thus, 63% of respondents believe that regional parties should dominate at the regional level. The most popular are the populists OĽaNO (17%), that started anti-corruption investigations during the political crisis (OĽANO, 2018). As a result, the relationship between ideological commitment and the likely electoral choice of student youth in both regions is somewhat weak. Instead, the regional factor of politics dominates, which was natural in the conditions of a deep political crisis in the Slovak Republic in 2018.

Conclusions

(1) In the Slovak Republic, the political context of European elections is feeble. The relatively recent accession of Slovakia to the European Union in 2004 never got Slovak voters interested in the elections to the European Parliament. Over four election campaigns (2004–2019), the Slovak Republic demonstrated the lowest turnout among all the European Union countries. Paradoxically with the overall trust of 50–70% in the European Parliament, the average European election turnout in the Slovak Republic is 18,01%. The key factors to shape the European election turnout peculiarities were the following: (a) more increased interest in the post-socialist countries regarding the national political elections (parliamentary and presidential elections) over the European, (b) we define European elections in the Slovak Republic as "Second-Order Elections", as confirmed by voting for parties or individual candidates, and (c) differentiated involvement in European elections in the west and the east of the country, e.g. in the Bratislava region, the turnout 5–6% exceeds the eastern Slovak Prešov region. Against the nationwide low turnout, this is a considerable difference.

(2) Based on the European election results in 2004–2019, we outline several features of electoral cleavages in the capital Bratislava Region and the East Slovak Prešov Region. *Firstly,* it is important not to misinterpret the electoral priorities of the Slovak voter. After all, these are European elections, where people support "domestic" parties that previously participated in the parliamentary elections. These elections are indeed the least popular in Slovakia and often result in reactionary voting: voters often support oppositional or unpopular political forces. *Secondly,* interest in European elections directly affects election results. Regions with prevailing euro-optimistic sentiments will have a higher turnout, and the voter will support the

forces that favour rapprochement with the European Union. Conversely, those with considerable Euroscepticism demonstrate lower turnout and tend to prefer Eurosceptic parties. Such regions frequently support populists manipulating the Slovak European present and future. According to the election results, we conventionally consider the Bratislava region a "Eurooptimist region" and the Prešov region a "Eurosceptic region". *Thirdly,* the party classification into Eurosceptics/Eurooptimists in the Slovak Republic is conditional as there are openly pro-European parties such as Progressive Slovakia or the anti-Euro-Atlantic political projects of Marian Kotleba. However, some political forces go beyond the proposed political poles and resist simplistic classifications. We would rather divide them into "soft-" and "hard Eurosceptics". Due to the political situation, multiple parties in the Slovak Republic have changed their attitude towards rapprochement/distancing from the European Union. Thus, the classic post-communist populist of the 1990s, Vladimir Mečiar (ĽS-HZDS), having lost the 1998 parliamentary elections, changed his sceptical Euro-Atlantic rhetoric to balanced pro-European. In the 1990s, the Christian Democrats, who profess conservative values, were cautious towards the likely accession of Slovakia to the European Union. However, since the 2000s, KDH has positioned itself as a pro-European political force. Another case is the political position of Robert Fico during the political crisis of 2018. While in power, his SMER-SD advocated rapprochement with the European Union, but in recent years has shown a more Eurosceptic stance.

Ultimately, it seems reasonable to associate the electoral cleavages between West and East Slovakia not with the Euroscepticism factor but rather with the support of conservative and populist forces. For the sake of comparison, in the first elections to the European Parliament in 2004, the victory of European integrators and liberal conservatives SDKÚ in the capital region is noticeable. In the East Slovak Prešov region, conservative Christian Democrats KDH won. The European elections of 2009 recorded a dualism in Bratislava between the then-still-young SMER-SD and SDKÚ-DS. In the Prešov region, SMER-SD, frequently taking advantage of social populism, won unequivocally. In 2014, SMER-SD won in the Bratislava region again, albeit with a smaller percentage, but in Prešov, SMER-SD and KDH established themselves as leaders. In the most recent European elections in the Bratislava region, Progressive Slovakia celebrated victory, while in the Prešov region, leaders remained the same, namely SMER-SD and KDH. Another aspect that testifies to the conservatism of the Prešov voter, even the negative attitude towards European integration, is their frequent voting for hard Eurosceptics resulting in most of these parties losing European seats from the Slovak Republic. The parties that managed to get five per cent or more in the Prešov region are the Communists of KSS (2004), the SNS nationalists (2009) and the People's Party Our Slovakia in 2019 (over 11%). To be fair, Marian Kotleba's project was quite popular in 2019 in the capital region, where it received more than 8%. This result was the only significant success hard Eurosceptics had in the capital region, so we regard it as an electoral deviation.

(3) We conducted our survey during a deep political crisis in the Slovak Republic in 2018. We confirm that the ideological cleavages among students in the west and east of the country are pretty conditional. The only proof of significant ideological differences is the highest level of trust in public activists in the capital region and Prešov – in the church. In matters of faith in political parties and individual politicians, students are unanimous: they do not trust them at all. Instead, in both regions, students are determined to search for "new faces" in Slovak politics. Therefore, the electoral choice focuses on regional political forces, not national parties.

The 2023 early parliamentary elections already illustrated the electoral preferences of Slovaks in the capital and the eastern region. On the one hand, we could observe the usual electoral cleavage between the capital and the east of the country: in the capital, the majority supported liberals (Progressive Slovakia), while in the far east, social populists led by SMER-SD were winning. On the other hand, the Christian democracy ideology (the KDH) dominated at 14% in the Prešov region but hardly scored 5% in the Bratislava region. There was a relative electoral cleavage based on the search for new faces in politics, yet Slovakia "resurrected" populist conservative Robert Fico. However, the capital supported alternative liberal politicians.

Of course, the electoral preferences of students are hard to identify with the electoral preferences of other social and age groups of voters. However, the example of the Slovak students' political orientations enables us to follow general electoral trends in the future. Secondly, students traditionally carry European values. This is especially evident in post-socialist societies, where seniors are particularly nostalgic for the socialist past (especially in East Slovakia). On the contrary, students lean towards European politics. After all, the legitimacy of some social or political institutions strongly affects the electoral choice of both students and other socio-demographic groups in the Slovak Republic, like mistrust of traditional politicians or high trust in the church.

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